

Atonement *at the* Cross



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 26:37, 38; 27:46; Mark 14:33, 34; Luke 22:40–44; John 19:28–30.*

Memory Text: “For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (*Colossians 1:13, 14, NIV*).

Key Thought: To describe the experience of Jesus in Gethsemane and on the cross in order to understand better the meaning of His atoning death.

A man sued a fast-food company, claiming that his obesity, and the health problems that followed from it, resulted from his four or five meals a week at the fast-food restaurant. He blamed the company, not himself, for his problems!

We all tend to be like that, though, blaming others for our misdeeds. But God does not accept excuses; He considers each one of us accountable for our sins. However, here's where the mystery of atonement begins to appear in its beauty. If we assume responsibility for our sins and have true faith in Jesus, God is willing to forgive us those sins. When we acknowledge our responsibility, we are liberated from the penalty of our rebellion. What happened to that penalty? God did not overlook it. No, instead He allowed it to fall on Jesus, and Christ's experience of that punishment will be our theme this week.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 6.*

Anguish: Heading to Gethsemane

Read Matthew 26:37, 38; Mark 14:33, 34. What was Jesus experiencing here at Gethsemane?

Jesus knew exactly what He would be facing within the next few hours. The experience was extremely painful and disturbing. At the moment He reached Gethsemane He could no longer contain His emotions and began to share them with Peter, James, and John (*Matt. 26:37, 38; Mark 14:33, 34*). The language He used is very important.

“He began to be deeply distressed and troubled” (*Mark 14:33, NIV*). The Greek verb *ekthambeo*, translated “deeply disturbed,” designates a highly emotional condition of deep excitement caused by something perplexing, amazing, or disorienting. It often is accompanied by fear, even terror and trembling. Matthew uses the verb *lupeo*, translated “overwhelmed by sorrow,” to designate a high level of emotional distress, sadness, and anxiety (*Matt. 26:38*). The second verb in Mark 14:33, *troubled* (Greek *ademoneo*), expresses more clearly anxiety, distress, and horror. The emotional and physical condition of Jesus was reaching new and unknown depths of discomfort and upheaval. The peace that characterized Him appeared to be waning; fear, trembling, and anxiety were taking over instead. Notice that Mark says that Jesus “began” to feel that way as He got to Gethsemane. This emotional turmoil was going to get worse.

Also, although no specific reason is given for the physical and emotional state of Jesus, through the light of the New Testament we can conclude that this is the result of bearing the world’s sin, not from fear of what humans would do to Him.

“ ‘My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death’ ” (*Mark 14:34, NIV*). This is the way Jesus Himself described His condition to the disciples. “My soul” could be interpreted as an emphatic expression, “I, myself,” or as designating the all-inclusive nature of His experience. The expression “overwhelmed with sorrow” is the translation of the Greek word *perilupos*, which usually designates a sorrow or affliction measureless in intensity and depth. In this particular case the intensity of the sorrow was bringing Jesus to the borders of the second death. He was already starting to suffer the fate that should have been ours.

Look at the sufferings of Jesus here and realize that this should have been you, not Him. How does this make you feel? How should those feelings be translated into a changed life?

The Cup: Willing Submission

Read Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane (*Matt. 26:39–42; Mark 14:35, 36; Luke 22:40–44*). What is the essence of the prayer? What major element stands out regarding Jesus' attitude concerning what He was about to face?

While in the Garden, Jesus used the metaphor of the cup to help us understand His inner feelings. The cup is used in the Bible to designate blessings received from the Lord (*Pss. 16:5, 23:5*) or the salvation He offers us (*Ps. 116:13*). But more often it refers to God's judgment against sin and sinners (*Ps. 75:8*). This cup contains the wine of His anger against His enemies, His judicial wrath (*Jer. 25:15, 16*). It is to this cup that Jesus was referring when He asked the Father to let it be taken away from Him, if possible (*Matt. 26:39, Mark 14:36*). He was experiencing loneliness—the abandonment of the disciples and particularly the abandonment of God. He sought the company and support of the disciples but didn't get it. And now, all by Himself, He asked the Father not to forsake Him. The answer that came back to Him from within the darkness of the divine silence was, "There is no other way to save the human race." Jesus voluntarily acquiesced to the will of the Father.

When the mob came to take Him, Peter tried to protect Him. How do Jesus' words to Peter (*John 18:11*) help us better understand Christ's willingness to suffer for us?

Jesus came to this planet to die: " 'The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' " (*Mark 10:45, NIV*). God by definition cannot die, but in order for Him to accept our sin and its penalty He became a human, a creature, and creatures do not have life in themselves; they can die. In Gethsemane Jesus was ready to die, to surrender His life for undeserving sinners everywhere.

When was the last time you purposefully allowed yourself to endure great suffering, purely on behalf of another person and with no personal gain for yourself? What can you learn about yourself from your answer? And what can you learn about Jesus from your answer too?

Darkness: Handed Over to the Enemy

In Gethsemane, and now in the events leading to the Cross, Jesus faced as never before the forces of evil. The struggle against satanic powers was to reach indescribable dimensions, testing the Savior to the very core of His being.

Among the indignities, He was being “‘betrayed into the hands of sinners’” (*Matt. 26:45, NIV*). The verb *betrayed* (Greek *paradidomi*, “to hand over”) is used several times to describe what would happen to Jesus. Here the context suggests that Judas is the one who betrays Him, but behind the wicked and voluntary decision of Judas the divine plan was being mysteriously fulfilled. It was God who “delivered [Christ] over to death for our sins” (*Rom. 4:25, NIV*). But Christ also gave Himself up for us, as seen in Galatians 2:20 and Ephesians 5:2—clear references to His sacrificial death on the cross.

According to Matthew 26:45, 46, Jesus was handed over into the hands of sinners. The verb expresses the idea of a transfer of a possession from one to another. Indeed, already “the light of God was receding from His vision, and He was passing into the hands of the powers of darkness.”—Ellen G. White, *Bible Echo and Signs of the Times*, August 1, 1892. Now He was going to be delivered totally into the hands of sinners; that is, into the hands of evil powers. For Him this was the hour “‘when darkness reigns’” (*Luke 22:53, NIV*), when He was to experience total separation from the Father’s love. Christ was going into the kingdom of darkness by Himself; and yet, it was there, in that kingdom, that He would defeat evil once and for all. As the incarnate God in human flesh, He overcame the kingdom of Satan.

How does Jesus describe His victory over the power of darkness?
Luke 11:20–22.

Luke says that Jesus was facing the hour of the dominion of darkness (*Luke 22:53*), and Paul adds that God “has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (*Col. 1:13, 14, NIV*). Christ went into the realm of darkness and experienced what we should have experienced, and He did it in order to deliver us from the power of Satan (*Acts 26:18*). While there He “disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (*Col. 2:15, NIV*).

How should our knowledge of Christ’s victory over these evil forces encourage us in our daily struggles amid the great controversy? What does His victory mean for us? How can we avail ourselves of that victory in our lives?

The Cry: Exploring the Mystery

On the cross, Jesus was suffering intensely. But so was the Father. God was in Christ, consequently, “the omnipotent God suffered with His Son.”—Ellen G. White, *The Upward Look*, p. 223. One could even say that “God Himself was crucified with Christ; for Christ was one with the Father.”—Ellen G. White in *Signs of the Times*, March 26, 1894. What was the nature of the suffering experienced by the Godhead that caused Christ to ask, “‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” (*Matt. 27:46, NIV*).

How do you understand Jesus’ cry in that verse?

On the cross God experienced something He had never before experienced: The penalty for sin. “It was necessary for the awful darkness to gather about His soul because of the withdrawal of the Father’s love and favor; for He was standing in the sinner’s place. . . . The righteous One must suffer the condemnation and wrath of God, not in vindictiveness; for the heart of God yearned with greatest sorrow when His Son, the guiltless, was suffering the penalty of sin. This sundering of the divine powers will never again occur throughout the eternal ages.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, p. 924.

This statement indicates, first, that the Father withdrew His love from the Son not because He did not love Him but because Jesus was dying in our place. There was no one available to mediate God’s love to His Son! Second, there was no vindictiveness in the heart of the Father as His Son was dying for the sins of the world. He did not rejoice in the death of the Son but was suffering with Him. Third, the real penalty God paid for our sins was “the sundering of the divine powers.” Ellen White is taking us inside the mystery of the relationships between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, describing for us what the Godhead underwent as Jesus was on the cross. The verb *to sunder* means “to break or force apart.” That which should have remained united was torn apart.

In short, through Christ’s sacrifice the Godhead was accepting responsibility for the world’s sins and, more so, the Godhead was suffering the consequences of these sins. Could it be that the Godhead, who cannot die, felt in a unique way—through the temporary sundering of the divine powers—the full intensity of the eternal death of the fallen race, through the temporal exclusion of the Son from the unity of the Godhead? The plan of salvation, the atonement, pulled the Trinity apart but momentarily. This experience of extreme “pain” within the Godhead took place only once and will never occur again.

That’s what our salvation cost.

It Is Finished: From Death to Life

Describe Jesus' last experiences just before He died (*John 19:28–30*). What did Jesus mean when He said that “it is finished”? What was finished?

Though the enemy, Satan, in conjunction with some of the leaders, had orchestrated Christ's death, at the crucial moment Jesus voluntarily surrendered His life to the Father: “He bowed his head and gave up his spirit” (*John 19:30, NIV*). The language suggests that He went to sleep, trusting in the goodness, benevolence, and love of the Father. He had said to the disciples, “I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord” (*John 10:17, 18, NIV*). Now when the proper moment arrived, He did just that.

“It is finished” meant that the perfect atoning sacrifice had once and for all been offered and that heaven and earth had been reconnected through it. The plan of salvation, kept secret for ages, was now fully revealed to the universe in the obedient death of the Son of God on the cross. God had provided the sacrifice, and now its atoning power was available to every human being who will look to the Cross as the exclusive way of salvation. Consequently, the sacrificial system of the Old Testament ended. At the moment Jesus died, the veil of the temple was torn apart, from top to bottom (*Matt. 27:51, Mark 15:38*), indicating that the presence of God and His accessibility to us was now located in the sacrifice and person of His beloved Son.

“It is finished” was a triumphal shout. He came to defeat Satan, and He accomplished this in the weakness of human flesh and in the midst of a mortal confrontation (*Heb. 2:14*). The ultimate destruction of Satan and his angels was fixed at the Cross.

This victory was revealed and sealed through His resurrection, when the forces of evil were unable to retain the Son of God inside the tomb. That glorious Sunday morning the words of Jesus were fulfilled: “I have authority to lay it [my life] down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father” (*John 10:18, NIV*). Jesus is “the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades” (*Rev. 1:18, NIV*).

What hope does the fact that Christ finished His work at the Cross offer us? What does that tell us about resting in Him and His works for us? How should this reality be expressed in our lives and behavior?

Further Study: “Man has not been made a sin-bearer, and he will never know the horror of the curse of sin which the Saviour bore. No sorrow can bear any comparison with the sorrow of Him upon whom the wrath of God fell with overwhelming force. Human nature can endure but a limited amount of test and trial. The finite can only endure the finite measure, and human nature succumbs; but the nature of Christ had a greater capacity for suffering; for the human existed in the divine nature, and created a capacity for suffering to endure that which resulted from the sins of a lost world. The agony which Christ endured, broadens, deepens, and gives a more extended conception of the character of sin, and the character of the retribution which God will bring upon those who continue in sin. The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ to the repenting, believing sinner.”—Ellen G. White *Comments, The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 1103.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Read carefully the Ellen G. White quote above. In essence she is saying that nothing any one of us, as finite creatures, has ever suffered could match the suffering of the Son of God on the cross. What does that tell us about what sin cost God? How does this idea, of Christ’s suffering being worse than anything we could face, help us understand how suffering could exist in a world created by a loving God? What comfort can you draw, if any, from knowing that God has suffered worse from sin than any of us ever had or ever could?
- 2 Dwell on Wednesday’s lesson, the idea of the temporal sun-dering of the Godhead. What can you take from that which can help you understand the depth of the atonement? How was that experience in the Godhead “the penalty” for our sin? Discuss your answer in class on Sabbath.
- 3 What does it mean to give of yourself unselfishly for others? What examples from everyday life can you find of this principle in operation? How can we, both as individuals and as a church, better manifest such unselfish giving?

Summary: On the cross, Jesus experienced the fullness of the sinner’s eternal separation from God. God Himself was in Christ paying the penalty for sin, atoning for our sins.

Advertising Misprint Brings Two to Church

by PHIL WARD

A misprinted ad in an Australian newspaper had a surprising result. Pastor Laurie McMurtry advertised his “Focus on Prophecy” seminar in three local newspapers. But one newspaper mistakenly printed the starting date as Monday night rather than Tuesday.

When Pastor McMurtry realized the error, he wondered what to do. He had a lot of preparation to do for the seminars, and he could hardly afford to spend the evening at the church. But what if someone came to the church on Monday evening for the seminar?

The pastor felt convicted to go to the church on Monday night. He packed his projector, his computer, and the seminar materials and drove to the distant Adventist church where the meetings were to be held.

When he arrived, the parking lot was empty. He waited some time, and still no one came. Then, as he was about to leave, a car drove into the parking lot. The pastor greeted the couple and explained the situation to them. “The seminar is actually tomorrow night,” he said.

“What a pity,” the couple replied. “We can’t come tomorrow night.”

“Then come inside, and I’ll hold the seminar just for you!” Pastor McMurtry said. He set up his equipment and presented the seminar topic to John and Pat Paynter. When the pastor gave the Paynters the printed material for the second week’s seminar, they told him that they couldn’t come on Tuesday nights. Pastor McMurtry offered to hold a seminar just for them on Wednesday mornings.

The Paynters, members of another church, were delighted with the strong emphasis on the Bible. They began attending the Adventist church two months later and are now actively involved.

“I’m sure that the Lord had a hand in that newspaper misprint,” says Pastor McMurtry, who never told the newspaper about the mistake.



JOHN and PAT PAYNTER (left) attend the Ballina Adventist Church in Australia. PHIL WARD is the author of *The Bible as Poetry*; he edits an evangelism newsletter for the Australian Union.